



# Information Brief

## Peer Group Strategies

*Involving peers in teaching and helping one another requires a shift on the part of adults from their view of young people as problems to be fixed to one of young people as resources to their families, schools, and communities. Schools that adopt this view provide ongoing, continuous opportunities for youth – from early childhood through late adolescence – to serve as resources to each other. Schools implement a variety of “peers as resources” structures, such as peer helpers, peer tutors, peer mediators, and peer mentors. These programs have been especially effective in the development of assets that make youth resilient to problem behavior.*

### CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *The school is a caring, respectful, encouraging community.*

*Indicator: Positive peer relationships are fostered in an environment that promotes them in the classrooms, in common areas of the school, at school-sponsored activities, and in the community.*

### INTRODUCTION

Students can be useful, contributing members of their school community, and youth service can play a major role in reducing the alienation felt by many from their families, schools, and communities - alienation that can lead to alcohol and drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. A peer resource model of education applies to any program or service that uses children and youth to work with other children and youth: peer or cross-age tutoring, peer helpers, peer mediation, youth leadership and youth involvement, cooperative learning, and service learning.

***[The vision for education]...“is a vision of raising compassionate, insightful and brave young people who will be able to look at the challenges they will inherit – racism, poverty, violence, sustainability – and respond with their whole selves. It is a vision of schools with heart and soul. Our children can become healing agents if schools – as their last public institution in a fractured time – give young people the skills and convictions they need. May we leave our world safer for our children by providing them with a school experience that educates their hearts along with their minds.”***

*- Linda Lantieri*

Peer group strategies attempt to create a prosocial group climate, peer group controls on antisocial behavior, and peer support for prosocial attitudes and behaviors as a norm of the school. Research shows that when school-wide reports of negative peer influence goes down, school-wide belief in conventional rules goes up, and schools become safer (CSPV, 1998).

### PEER MENTORS

Peer mentoring programs match older youth with younger children in one-to-one relationships to provide guidance for the children. Together they may work on schoolwork, deal with social relationships, talk about social issues such as drinking, smoking, and using drugs, sort out family problems, or reflect upon other issues of growing up. A peer mentor can be someone with whom the younger child can simply hang out.

Peer mentoring programs have many benefits, including providing positive influences for a younger student who may need a little extra attention or support. Mentors can provide encouragement, friendship, and listening ears. They can mean the difference between dropping out of school and graduating, or between getting involved with drugs and developing the strength and confidence to resist them.

Effective mentoring programs require training for the mentors, careful matching between the mentor and the child to be mentored, and ongoing support to maintain and improve the mentoring relationship. If a school wants to start a peer mentoring program, it should turn to experienced national and local programs such as the National Mentoring Partnership, the Corporation for National Service, and Americorps.

### PEER TUTORING

Hundreds of evaluations of cooperative learning and peer and cross-age tutoring have found both positive academic and social development results (Benard, 2000). Adding a well-designed peer or cross-age tutoring component to an elementary or secondary school program has the potential for significantly augmenting the school's capacity to promote academic achievement and interpersonal relationships. A

Stanford University study (Levin, 1984) found that peer tutoring is more consistently cost-effective than computer assisted instruction, reduction of class size, or increased time for raising the math and reading achievement levels of both tutors and the students they tutored.

Those students who benefit most from peer tutoring programs are the tutors themselves, because they receive more intensive exposure to the material they teach than do the ones whom they teach. However, training peer tutors is an essential ingredient if the program is to be effective.

#### PEER MEDIATION

A student's peer group can influence the way that students react to conflict and potential violence — for better or worse. When a school implements strategies aimed at peaceable solutions to daily conflict, students can learn from each other how to negotiate potentially violent situations to the acceptance of all students involved. Instruction in conflict resolution skills can help students recognize that they can learn new ways to deal with daily conflicts.

Peer mediation is a program strategy based on negotiation. The main focus for peer mediation is to provide students with a means to solve disputes without confrontation and violence. The use of peer mediation can substantially change how students approach and settle conflicts. When used on a regular basis, students can learn an alternative method of settling disputes and add an important life skill to their repertoires.

The main focus of peer mediation is to bring all students a way to solve disputes with means other than confrontation and violence. Trained student conflict mediators serve as unbiased third parties to help their peers settle disputes by applying problem-solving strategies to create an outcome that is satisfactory to all parties involved.

Although it can be implemented as a stand-alone program, peer mediation should be used as one piece of

a broader curriculum of violence prevention and conflict resolution (Skiba and Peterson, February 2000).

Initial training of peer mediators requires an estimated 12 to 15-hour commitment. During this training time, students learn the basics of peer mediation (problem solving, communication, and interest-based negotiation strategies) and increase their awareness of how conflict develops. Role playing and active learning are essential elements of training. Peer mediators learn that conflict can be handled in a positive, constructive manner. They learn that the role of the peer mediator is not to pass judgment on the parties involved, but to help the students come to a solution that is acceptable to all parties. The students in disagreement come to the peer mediator voluntarily and are not forced to come to an agreement immediately.

The effectiveness of peer mediation is measured by the success of mediations and how students and peer mediators view the mediation process. Although effectiveness has not been properly documented, a wide variety of studies conducted in different locations and situations did find that peer mediation appears to be a promising strategy for improving school climate (Skiba Peterson, February 2000).

#### SUMMARY

Leaders in the field of cooperative learning and peer tutoring conclude that the key to successful peer resource programs is that they are created in the context of a collaborative culture with cooperative structures and relationships at all levels within a school or district (Benard, 2000). Despite compelling evidence that peer group strategies are effective in building student success academically and socially, to the puzzlement of researchers and reformers, implementation of these strategies has failed to take hold in schools. The answer seems to lie in a conflict between the basic beliefs of educators regarding the traditional role of students in their own education where they are consumers of help and the more recent view that youth are resources and producers.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
  - Resolving Conflict Creatively: <http://www.esrnational.org>
  - The National Mentoring Partnership: <http://www.mentoring.org>
- **In this Handbook:** See additional briefs in this section on *A Continuum of Programs and Services*, *Positive Youth Development*, *Youth Leadership/Student Empowerment*, and *Service Learning*. In other sections of the manual, please refer to *Early Warning*, *Timely Response*, *Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide*, and "Success4's Critical Elements." For information beyond the scope of this handbook, see the Resources Section.